

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

The President's Weekly Address

May 29, 2010

This weekend, as we celebrate Memorial Day, families across America will gather in backyards and front porches, fire up the barbeque, kick back with friends, and spend time with people they care about. That's as it should be. But I also hope that as you do so, you'll take some time to reflect on what Memorial Day is all about, on why we set this day aside as a time of national remembrance.

It's fitting every day to pay tribute to the men and women who wear the uniform of the United States of America. Still, there are certain days that have been set aside for all of us to do so. Veterans Day is one such day, when we are called to honor Americans who've fought under our country's flag.

Our calling on Memorial Day is different. On this day, we honor not just those who've worn this country's uniform, but the men and women who've died in its service, who've laid down their lives in defense of their fellow citizens, who've given their last full measure of devotion to protect the United States of America. These are the men and women I'll be honoring this weekend, and I know many of you are doing the same.

There are any number of reasons America emerged from its humble beginnings as a cluster of colonies to become the most prosperous, most powerful nation on Earth. There is the hard work, the resilience, the character of our people. There is the ingenuity and enterprising spirit of our entrepreneurs and innovators. There are the ideals of opportunity, equality, and freedom that have not only inspired our people to perfect our own Union but inspired others to perfect theirs as well.

But from the very start, there was something more: a steadfast commitment to serve, to fight, and if necessary, to die to preserve America and advance the ideals we cherish. It's a commitment witnessed at each defining moment along the journey of this country. It's what led a ragtag militia to face British soldiers at Lexington and Concord. It's what led young men, in a country divided half slave and half free, to take up arms to save our Union. It's what led patriots in each generation to sacrifice their own lives to secure the life of our Nation, from the trenches of World War I to the battles of World War II, from Inchon and Khe Sanh to Mosul and Marja.

That commitment, that willingness to lay down their lives so we might inherit the blessings of this Nation, is what we honor today. But on this Memorial Day, as on every day, we're called to honor their ultimate sacrifice with more than words. We're called to honor them with deeds.

We're called to honor them by doing our part for the loved ones our fallen heroes have left behind and looking after our military families, by making sure the men and women serving this country around the world have the support they need to achieve their mission and come home safely, by making sure veterans have the care and assistance they need, in short, by serving all those who have ever worn the uniform of this country—and their families—as well as they have served us.

On April 25th, 1866, about a year after the Civil War ended, a group of women visited a cemetery in Columbus, Mississippi, to place flowers by the graves of Confederate soldiers who had fallen at Shiloh. As they did, they noticed other graves nearby belonging to Union dead.

But no one had come to visit those graves or place a flower there. So they decided to lay a few stems for those men too, in recognition not of a fallen Confederate or a fallen Union soldier, but a fallen American.

A few years later, an organization of Civil War veterans established what became Memorial Day, selecting a date that coincided with the time when flowers were in bloom. So this weekend, as we commemorate Memorial Day, I ask you to hold all our fallen heroes in your hearts and, if you can, lay a flower where they have come to rest.

NOTE: The address was recorded at approximately 4:55 p.m. on May 27 in the Map Room at the White House for broadcast on May 29. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 28 but was embargoed for release until 6 a.m. on May 29.

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